

Tuskegee training fueled Air Force career

African American airman fought abroad and on 'battlefields at home'

By Megan Greenwell

Updated: 2:18 a.m. ET July 14, 2006

Lt. Col. James V. Kennedy, a Tuskegee Airman who went on to become a career Air Force officer, was honored at Arlington National Cemetery yesterday for 30 years of service to his country.

Kennedy, 84, who died May 1 at the Knollwood military retirement home in Northwest Washington of complications from pneumonia, became a pilot through the program at Tuskegee Army Air Field, which trained African American men to serve in combat units during World War II. Although he did not see combat during that war, he returned to a newly integrated military and flew combat missions in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

"He knew it had been said that blacks didn't have the courage or the intelligence to fly," said Kennedy's daughter Royal Kennedy Rodgers of Northwest Washington, who said her earliest recollections of her "Papa" were of him in uniform. "He was always interested in flying, and that was the only opportunity he had."

'Battlefields at home'

Kennedy had no patience for segregation, his four children said, and at one point he was arrested when he refused to leave a whites-only Air Force officers club.

"Jim was a member of what is now called 'the Greatest Generation,' but his greatness was earned not only on the battlefields abroad, but also on the battlefields at home," his son-in-law Johnathan Rodgers said during a service at Post Memorial Chapel on the cemetery grounds, after which Kennedy was buried.

When Congress ruled that the U.S. Army Air Corps must form an all-black flight combat unit in 1941, the War Department deliberately set standards officials believed that many blacks would be unable to meet.

Hundreds of black men passed the test, however, and were sent to Tuskegee, Ala., the site of the institute first led by Booker T. Washington. Over the next few years, about 1,000 men were trained for combat in the 99th Fighter Squadron, the only unit in which black men could fly in combat.

By the time Kennedy graduated from Tuskegee in 1945, the war was over, so he returned to his home town of Chicago to enjoy civilian life as a newly married man. Within a few years, however, Kennedy was recalled to active duty in Korea shortly after President Harry S. Truman officially integrated all branches of the armed forces.

Returning to the United States after missions in Korea, Kennedy decided he would spend the rest of his career as an Air Force officer. He received bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering from the Air Force Institute of Technology in Ohio and was assigned to the Aero-Space Medical Laboratory, where he worked with NASA's first astronauts on the Apollo space program.

In 1965, Kennedy returned to the cockpit to fly in Vietnam. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for "heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight" but kept the news quiet.

"I did not know until a few years ago that he had received the award," said his daughter Shawn, Royal's twin sister, who lives in the District and New Orleans. She said she still doesn't know the story of what led to the award. "Even then, it was a family friend who told me about it, not him. He didn't talk about the ugly side of war."

Opportunities to see the world

What he did talk at length about, his family said, were the opportunities he had to see the world. While training in France, he took frequent weekend trips to Paris, and the entire Kennedy family lived in Japan before the Vietnam War. Kennedy especially loved going to jazz clubs, plays and other cultural events, his children recalled.

Kennedy's work provided special experiences for his children, who lived on Air Force bases around the world.

"We would go over and get in the planes and play with them," Royal Kennedy Rodgers said. "Then, once a year, they had Air Force Day, and they would open the base to the public. We couldn't get over why people wanted to come and see this humdrum base."

When he retired from the Air Force in 1972, Kennedy continued to see the world, but this time from a boat. He built a 46-foot sailboat by himself and set out on voyages along the California coast and through the Panama Canal to the Caribbean.

"The day that boat launched was probably one of the happiest days of his life," Johnathan Rodgers said.

Kennedy moved to the District from Goleta, Calif., after his wife of 57 years, Shirley, died in 2003. He spent almost every weekend with his daughters and grandchildren. He also had two sons, Kevin and Colin.

"They had good lives," Shawn Kennedy said. "They did everything they wanted to do."